Best Practice on
RACE, ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE DATA COLLECTION

Prepared by Department of Mental Health
OFFICE OF MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS

RACE, ETHNICITY AND LANGUAGE DATA COLLECTION

- **WHY?**
- **What is the purpose of collecting information on race, ethnicity and preferred language?**

- **BECAUSE:**
- **We want to be sure that all clients receive the highest-quality care.**

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Consistent data collection in these areas will help us improve the planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of services and programs.

Key to our efforts is that data must be collected:
- Consistently
- Accurately
- Professionally

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Self-Identification

Self-reporting, or self-identification, is the preferred method for collecting data on race, ethnicity and language.

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First ask about *ETHNICITY* --

An Ethnic Group, or Ethnicity, is defined as a group of people who are connected by a common national origin, history, language, customs and cultural experiences.

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Another way to think of "ethnicity" is to think about "ancestry."

Ancestry refers to a person's ethnic origin, heritage, descent, or "roots," which may reflect the place of birth of the person, or the person's parents or ancestors, before their arrival in the United States.

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A person's ancestry is not necessarily the same as his or her place of birth.

For example, not everyone of Irish ancestry was born in Ireland.

Sometimes roots can be traced to geographic areas outside the United States (such as "German" or "Jamaican"), while others are identities which evolved in the United States ("Pennsylvania Dutch" or "Cajun").

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Possible ways to ask about ethnicity:

"How would you identify yourself in terms of ethnicity?"

"What is your ancestry?"

"What is your heritage?"

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Categories for Race:

American Indian or Alaska Native

A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains a tribal affiliation or community attachment.

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Categories for Race:

Asian

A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

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Categories for Race:

Black or African-American

A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.

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DATA COLLECTION

Categories for Race:

Black/Hispanic

A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa *AND* who is of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin.

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DATA COLLECTION

 Categories for Race:

Native Hawaiian or
Other Pacific Islander

A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

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Categories for Race:

White/Hispanic

A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa, *AND* who is of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin.

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 Categories for Race:

White/Non-Hispanic

A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

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DATA COLLECTION

Race -- Only one choice may be selected, however, the fields allow for the selection of:

- **Other**
- **Chooses not to self-identify**
- **Unknown**

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To gather information on RACE:

Show client the race categories, and ask him or her to select one category for race.

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"How would you identify yourself in terms of ethnicity?"

Client Questions / Concerns - Samples and Responses

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Interview Example #1:

Client: "I'm Ukrainian. We came here in 1998."

The new data fields in the MHIS system will allow for the selection of a specific response such as "Ukrainian."

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Interview Example #2:

Client: "I'm mixed -- my mother is Cuban-Puerto Rican, and my father is Irish-American. Do you have a category for that?"

For now, only 1 identity can be listed, but in the future the system will be able to accommodate up to 3 identities.

Let families know that you can update their demographic data in the future. For now, have them decide how they want to be listed.

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Interview Example #3:

Client: "Can't you tell by looking at me?"

Possible response:

"Well, usually I can. But sometimes I'm wrong, so we think it's better to let people tell us."

Hasnain-Wynia, R. Pierce, D. *A Toolkit for Collecting Race, Ethnicity, and Primary Language Information from Patients*. The Health Research and Educational Trust. February, 2005.

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Interview Example #4:

Client: "I'm American. Of course, if you go back in my family's history, they came here from Italy in the 1940's, but we've been here ever since. I'm just plain old American, as far as I'm concerned."

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NOTE:

The data fields include a field for "American."

In the 2000 U.S. Census, the number of respondents who reported "American" as their ancestry rose to 20.2 million from 12.4 million in the 1990 census.

There are many reasons people may select "American" as their ancestry, including the length of time their family has been here, or the fact that they have such mixed backgrounds that they do not identify with any particular group.

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Interview Example #5:

Client: "I'm human."

Possible response:

"Is that your way of saying that you don't want to answer the question? If so, I can say that you didn't want to answer."

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Interview Example #6:

Client: "It's none of your business."

Possible response:

"I'll put down that you didn't want to answer, which is fine."

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Interview Example #7:

Client: "Who looks at this?"

Possible response:

"The only people who see this information are those involved in your care and treatment and who have a need to know on that basis."

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Interview Example #8:

Client: "Are you trying to find out if I'm a U.S. citizen?"

Possible response:

"No, definitely not! Also, you should know that the confidentiality of what you say is protected by law."

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If a client--

- **identifies him or herself as belonging to a race or ethnic group that does not appear in the MHIS table, what do I do?**
  Select *"Other."*

- **does not want to self-identify with a particular race or ethnic group, what do I do?**
  Select *"Chooses not to self-identify."*

- **identifies him or herself with more than one race or ethnicity, what do I do?**
  Explain that the system can only accept one choice right now, but will be fixed in the future to recognize multiple races or ethnicities. For now, list one and offer to update the record then.

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LANGUAGE

What is the difference between asking for "primary language" and "language at home"? Why is it important?

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Massachusetts residents speak over 115 different languages at home, according to the US Census 2000.

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The child's primary language may be different than the language spoken at home.

"Primary Language" refers to the language mainly spoken by the child.

"Language At Home" refers to the primary language of the parents.